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ABSTRACT

Four school resource officers (SROs) and four school administrators were brought together by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, located in the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, to discuss effective SRO-administrator relationships. This brief research bulletin describes the results of that meeting. It begins with a discussion of the structure of the meeting and a review of past research on SRO-administrator relationships. It then discusses several of the key issues addressed at the meeting, including program practices, the reporting of incidents, discretion, written policies, communication, and personality. The bulletin next offers the advice provided by meeting participants, particularly on youth-focused activities and attitudes. Finally, the bulletin provides some thoughts about next steps with regard to enhancing the relationship between SROs and administrators. (WFA)

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RESEARCH BULLETIN
Center for the Prevention of School Violence
North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS: "TALKING AND WALKING" TOGETHER TO MAKE SAFER SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

With information that dates back to the mid 1990s regarding the importance of the School Resource Officer (SRO) - school administrator relationship, the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, located in the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, convened a focus group of SROs and administrators to discuss the nature of the SRO-administrator relationship today. Sponsored with support from the Carolinas Institute for Community Policing with funds from the U.S. Department of Justice Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office, the group discussed a range of issues and offered advice for those who are about to be involved in such a relationship.

After reviewing the structure of the meeting as well as past Center research about SRO-administrator relationships, this bulletin will describe several of the points made by participants. It then will offer the advice provided by participants. Finally, it will provide some thoughts about next steps with regard to enhancing the relationship between SROs and administrators.

THE MEETING

Four SROs and four administrators were brought together by the Center to discuss effective SRO-administrator relationships. Both sets of participants were selected because they had several years of experience with the SRO approach. Pairs of SROs and administrators were deliberately not selected as there was a desire to bring together people who did not have connections to one another so that potentially franker discussion could take place.

The SROs who participated had familiarity with implementing the approach at the elementary, middle, and high school levels as well as in both rural and urban schools. The administrators were either assistant or full principals in middle and high schools from either rural or urban areas. For the most part, the SRO-administrator experiences both sets of participants had were positive; however, they were able to offer comments on several issues as well as advice for those who are about to be involved in such a relationship.

The meeting began with each participant describing his/her experience with particular attention being paid to their experience with the SRO approach. Discussion flowed easily as they were exposed to past Center research about SRO-administrator relationships and were asked questions which tapped into their experiences.

PAST CENTER RESEARCH

The Center for the Prevention of School Violence's past research on SROs revealed that the SRO-administrator relationship is of critical

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importance. Focus groups of SROs and administrators conducted in the mid 1990s led to recommendations which suggested that the two perspectives share a common vision defined by a concern for creating schools in which students are able to be safe and successful.

The group of SROs and administrators that was brought together to discuss SRO-administrators relationships today was exposed to the past research. This past research had identified areas of difficulty in the relationships which included misunderstanding with regard to expectations about the SRO's role, miscommunications, mismatched personalities, and challenging circumstances. Models identified as reflective of the relationship included the "boss-employee" model, the "separate but (un) equal" model, and the "team." Suggestions from the past research included efforts to build trust, communicate both formally and informally, take time to develop the relationship as well as the role of the SRO in the school, and employ the "team" model. The SROs and administrators meeting in 2002 voiced that the research findings from the past were still valid today, and, therefore, they were used as a starting point for the rest of the meeting's discussion.

SROs-ADMINISTRATORS: 2002

The group which was brought together in 2002 needed little prompting to discuss SRO-administrator relationships. Even though, as stated before, the participants for the most part had been in positive SRO-administrator relationships, their discussion highlighted some major issues which can serve as focal points for further actions that might be taken to enhance such relationships. The issues involve program practices, the reporting of incidents, discretion, written policies, communication, and personality.

With regard to program practices, discussion focused on selection, training, and introduction of the SRO into the school. The critical nature of selecting officers who want to be in schools rather than those who do not was emphasized by both the SROs and administrators. Allowing the administrator to be involved in the selection was also voiced. How this voice is articulated varied, but what was said to be most critical was that the principal have some opportunity to at least describe the type of SRO needed by the involved school.

Administrators, despite having a great deal of experience with SROs, did not have much knowledge of the training SROs receive and how they receive it. The administrators did, however, voice some concerns that SROs are sometimes away from their schools for training.

Careful introduction of the SRO into the school was discussed at length with several points made. The starting point for this introduction was seen as a meeting, even if brief, between the SRO and the administrator. This was seen as an action needed to get the relationship off the right start and perhaps to deal with some of the misunderstandings regarding expectations which both the focus group SROs and administrators had experienced and the earlier Center research had revealed.

In addition to meetings between the SROs and administrators, the participants suggested that SROs be given an opportunity to meet with the entire school staff and be allowed to explain the roles they are expected to perform. Also discussed was how to introduce SROs to students with varied approaches from interactions in classrooms to speaking to whole-school assemblies offered as options. The SROs and administrators indicated that the decision of how to introduce the SRO to the school should be school specific with the decision made by the administrator and SRO together.

One additional point made regarding the introduction of the SRO was a point made that the SRO also needs in some way to be introduced to parents and others who are part of "the school community." Because the SRO's impact is sometimes felt beyond the school into homes and the community, attempting to build understanding with this broader audience is seen as good practice and as assisting, again, with some of the misunderstanding which sometimes surrounds expectations.

Certainly one of the program practices that drew special attention from the participants was the reporting of incidents. SROs and administrators were in disagreement both between and amongst themselves about reporting as some of them stated that reporting is a clear process that is not manipulable while others stated that the opportunity to manipulate reporting, particularly on the part of the administrators by not investigating possible incident occurrence and also by not including SROs when they should be, exists.

One of the reasons for the level of disagreement regarding reporting is that the "black-white" distinction which is often drawn between school discipline and statute law quickly gives way to a gray area when put into practice. This gray area is the area of discretion, another point of conversation for the focus group participants. While the discussion of discretion initially focused on SRO discretion with regard to arrest, the discretion of the administrator with regard to applying school policy was also noted. Both perspectives were enlightened by the expressed view that both SROs and administrations are professionals who need to have some opportunity to rely on their expertise in those situations when "discretion is the better part of valor."

Written policies were discussed with reference to both SRO program policies and school policies. While noting that many programs operate with little to no paperwork specific to the SRO approach, participants acknowledged that having documents in place which describe the relationship between the school system and the law enforcement agency would be useful. Delineating the broader relationship between the school system and law enforcement agency was viewed as work to be undertaken by superintendents and sheriffs or chiefs of police. Such an undertaking was seen as providing a strong framework on which school-specific relationships could be founded. With regard to the relationship between the school building administrator and SRO, written understandings were seen as less important.

Beyond written policies related to SROs, school policies were discussed with SROs articulating some questions about whether written school policies are ever followed. One SRO wondered "if my principal is following the same student handbook that I was issued?" Again, discussion turned to allowing for discretion but with a caveat that such discretion can really only be practiced if there is a good relationship in place.

The key to a good relationship according to both the SROs and administrators, not surprisingly, is communication. "Talk is cheap" said one SRO but "talk is necessary." While formal communication via meetings and inclusion of SROs in staff meetings was mentioned, informal communication was seen as more valuable. "Talking and walking" is what needs to happen, said one administrator. By doing such, not only does information sharing between the SRO and administrator occur, it also sends a message to the students and staff that the SRO and administrator work together. It also is an efficient way for them to provide coverage to their school as a team.

Of course, implementing the team SRO-administrator model takes more than talk; it also takes, according to the focus group participants, a meshing of personalities. One SRO stated that the relationship needs to be worked on, and the personalities need to "mold" to each other given that there is a foundation of defined expectations and avenues in existence for regular communication. The personalities need to be, in the best situations, "checks and balances" of each other, said one SRO.

Overall, the discussions of program practices, reporting, discretion, policies, communication, and personality which were largely derived from the flow of conversation between the SROs and administrators rather than by explicit prompts provide insights into areas that need to be addressed to enhance the relationships which exist between SROs and administrators. While not far afield from points made in earlier Center research about these relationships, the points articulated by the focus group participants added depth to existing understanding of the relationships.

ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO WILL NEED TO RELATE

In order to begin development of information that will be offered in the form of advice for those who want to be successful with the SRO approach, the focus groups participants were explicitly asked to offer advice to officers about to become SROs and administrators about to be assigned their own SROs. Advice for the SROs was asked of the participating SROs; advice for the administrators, from the participating administrators.

A theme quickly emerged in the advice offered by SROs to new SROs: you must be youth focused if you are going to be successful as an SRO. You must "like kids," "love kids," and "strive to help the kids with your actions."

Beyond the advice about youth, SROs also spoke of the importance of recognizing that there is a difference between the school and "the street." New SROs must understand that "it is a lot different handling a child who has a chance" than an adult who may be beyond rehabilitation.

With regard to role orientation, the SROs emphasized that new SROs must have a "strong desire to make things right." New SROs must put in "quality time" in their schools because doing so will communicate that "they care and want to be there." Letting the staff and students "get to know you" is essential and boils down to "being a people person."

With specific focus on advice regarding the relationship between SROs and administrators, the SROs suggested the new SROs have meetings with administrators which address expectations, roles, respect, and communications. Establishing open lines of communication was emphasized as was being flexible and able to adjust. Keeping administrators informed about "what you want to accomplish" was also mentioned.

Administrators advising other administrators began by emphasizing that the administrator needs to know the SRO's role (and vice versa) and that the administrator needs to assist the SRO in communicating an understanding of the SRO's role to the school community. The communication needs to be both formal and informal and needs to be ongoing.

While communicating is essential, another piece of advice offered was that doing more than talking with regard to the SRO was important. The administrators advised that the students are watching how the SRO and administrator work together and that much is communicated in what they observe. The advice to the administrators with regard to their SROs was to keep this in mind when working with their SROs where students can observe them.

Another piece of advice from the administrators to their colleagues was to take time to educate the SRO about the school. Although time is often in short supply, the administrators strongly advised that to "sit and chat" and "talk and walk" were important so that the SRO can learn about all facets of the school.

Finally, the administrators were advised to "see their SRO as a friend and colleague... a trained, equal professional." By doing so, the opportunity to put the SRO-administrator team into action in a proactive way will be generated and the most benefit from the SRO's presence will be derived.

CONCLUSION

The 2002 focus group of SROs and administrators reaffirmed much of what was previously known about SRO-administrator relationships. While there was some talk of possibly developing guidelines regarding the relationship, much of what was said cannot be captured by guidelines and may ultimately be best addressed through development of "best practices advice" for SROs
and administrators.

With regard to such best practices advice, next steps logically will build upon the advice generated by this group of SROs and administrators. They also logically will focus on the points made regarding program practices,

reporting, discretion, policies, communication, and personality.

Moving from the nonpaired SRO-administrator focus group format to one in which pairs of successful teams of SROs and administrators also makes sense as these are the individuals who know best what the "best practices advice" should be. Such successful teams are, after all, the ones who "talk and walk" together everyday to make schools safer. They put into practice "best practices" and know ultimately what is best for all concerned.

The Center for the Prevention of School Violence thanks the following individuals for their contributions to the planning and conduct of the focus group described in this bulletin:

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